



Barricades, Paris, July 1848

The Class Struggles in France

The three great classic works that Karl Marx wrote on class struggle in France have a special place in the Marxist canon. They establish the literary form, or “genre”, of revolutionary political economy, and so they are the fore-runners of the typical revolutionary political analysis as done by Lenin, Mao and Cabral, for some examples among many.

They record the disastrous consequences of class isolation: two revolutions (1848 and 1871) drowned in the blood of the Parisian working proletariat. And together they (but

particularly the “18th Brumaire”) establish Marx as a writer of the first rank.

Let us look at this last, literary point first. Marx, though born and brought up in Germany, was already as a young man a fluent French-speaker and writer. Marx and his new bride Jenny von Westphalen moved to Paris in October 1843 after the banning, in April of that year, of the magazine *Rheinische Zeitung* of which Marx had been the editor.

During the following five years Marx was thrown out of Paris twice, moving first to Brussels (from which he was also thrown out) and finally settling in London, where he struggled with the language at first, helped by Frederick Engels who was a good English-speaker.

So by 1848 Marx was more than familiar with the highly-developed and sophisticated French literary and political culture of his time. He was a top expert, and this comes through in these works on France.

One consequence is that Marx makes all sorts of references and allusions to French personalities and customs that are not familiar to readers who have been brought up reading other languages such as English. But it pays the reader to get used to these, and to press on, leaving detailed explanations for later, but absorbing the main story.

In the early 19th century France was the most politically advanced country as a consequence of the Great French

Revolution, which had burst out less than six decades earlier, in 1789, and which had swept out feudalism from France and menaced and attacked feudalism all over Europe. By 1848 the French Revolution was still more recent than the Second World War is to us in 2016. The July, 1830 reactionary coup that had brought Louis Philippe, the Duke of Orleans, to power was more recent in 1848 than the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP is to us now.

“The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850” (Part 1 is attached, and downloadable via the link below) is a book that describes the changing “conjuncture” of France in those years. It describes the dynamic balance of class forces as between workers, peasants, landlords and bourgeoisie. It describes the dynamics of conflict between the different, conflicting internal fractions of the bourgeoisie. And it describes Louis Bonaparte’s unprincipled, opportunist way of balancing such contending classes and playing them against each other, which has forever afterwards given us the word “Bonapartism”.

This main text describes the struggle in the months between February 1848 when the regime of Louis Philippe was overthrown, to June 1848 when their allies turned on the working class, isolated them, and massacred them.

“The workers were left no choice,” wrote Marx, “they had to starve or let fly. They answered on June 22 with the tremendous insurrection in which the first great battle

was fought between the two classes that split modern society. It was a fight for the preservation or annihilation of the bourgeois order. The veil that shrouded the republic was torn asunder.”

3000 captured proletarian revolutionaries were shot in cold blood by troops loyal to the bourgeoisie. This first direct fight between the two leading modern classes produced, not civilised behaviour, but instead unprecedented barbarity from the ruling bourgeois class. The barbarity was repeated 23 years later at the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871.

What *The Class Struggles in France* does for us is to demonstrate the realities and permutations of class conflict. It shows once again how the working class must have allies, and it shows how treacherous, brutal and ruthless the bourgeoisie can be. It also shows how lightning-fast revolutionary events can be.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: Part 1 of [Karl Marx’s “The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850”](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).